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ABSTRACT

A two-year ethnographic study of kindergarteners' experiences in a French immersion classroom focused on the processes by which children find and construct meaning through classroom interaction and communication processes. Data were gathered through classroom observation and videotapes. The initially unilingual English-speaking students were observed frequently during their kindergarten year and intermittently in first grade. Individual and group sense-making strategies observed include: attending to meaning; negotiation of meaning; relying on translation or mediation of meaning; participation, modeling, and imitation; anticipating routine sequence and patterns of interaction; using the filter of past experience; comparing first and second languages; good guessing or approximation; random guessing; sizing up people and context; attending to paralinguistic features in communication; relying on the reciprocity of communication; attending to meaning-context or meaning structures of the situation; and asking questions. Other findings include: the interaction and overlapping of teacher-talk and student-talk is important; there was a scarcity of natural, child-initiated communication during teacher-directed activities; and the central process for kindergarten students appears to be adapting to the demands of school life, with language-learning a secondary process. (MSE)

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WHAT DID SHE SAY?

MEANING IN A SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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WHAT DID SHE SAY? MEANING IN A SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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As a participant in the culture of the kindergarten classroom, the child is actively involved in making sense of his or her experience (Edwards and Furlong, 1978). For the young child beginning a second language immersion program in kindergarten, this means coping not only with the new experience of formal schooling but also with the experience of acquiring a second language. Unfortunately, very little research of any kind has focused on classroom processes in French immersion kindergartens. Most of the research in the area of French immersion education has been more concerned with student achievement than with classroom processes (Carey, 1984; Genesee 1985) and there has been a heavy reliance on paper and pencil tests and written questionnaires for gathering data. Perhaps because kindergarteners do not respond well to such methods, there is a dearth of studies concerning French immersion kindergartens, and yet, kindergarten is the very grade which affords us the best opportunity to witness the child's first contact with French immersion schooling. This paper reports selected findings from a two-year ethnographic study which investigates the child's experience of French immersion kindergarten and the processes by which children find and construct meaning in the second language classroom environment. By focusing on classroom interaction and communication processes, we can learn more about the nature of the child's experience in French immersion classrooms and the implications of that experience for language acquisition theory and for classroom teaching.

METHODS

In keeping with ethnographic perspectives, we became familiar with the patterns of daily life in the immersion classroom by taking an observer's role involving prolonged and repeated observations and other forms of ethnographic inquiry (cameras, audiotapes, videotapes, and interviews). Two groups (classes) of unilingual English-speaking Canadian children enrolled in a half-day total French immersion kindergarten program were followed on a continuous basis throughout the 1985-86 school year and subsequently for a portion of their grade one school year in 1986-87. The same teacher taught both kindergarten groups and remained with part of the students the following year in grade one. The teacher spoke to the children exclusively in French for over ninety per cent of the school day. In addition, we occasionnally observed other French immersion kindergarten classrooms and a regular English first language Kindergarten, in order to ascertain whether the patterns we had observed were particular to the second language immersion experience or were part of the kindergarten schooling experience in general.

The researchers observed both French immersion kindergarten groups two days a week during strategically selected blocks of four to six weeks interspersed throughout the 1985-86 school year and on an intermittent basis the following year in grade one. The use of two observers assured an exchange of viewpoints and a more complete observation, providing one of the methodological advantages of the project. The video-camera was in each class once a week from the beginning of September until the end of April, providing a continuous record even when the researchers were not there. The videotapes have proven to be of utmost significance, perhaps the most important data of all, providing pertinent information on social context, shared meanings, and the paralanguage dimensions (Pennycook, 1985) of sense-making, providing a priceless audio and vidual recording of classroom activity.

Other forms of ethnographic inquiry used in the study include: field notes, note-keeping by the teacher, and both semi-structured and open-ended interviewing of parents and children, including interviews with the children that incorporate the use of a puppet. These fieldwork methods have provided broad contextual information and have been extremely helpful in the analysis of our observational notes and the videotapes.

A preliminary analysis and interpretation of a portion of the data is now complete. The majority of the video and audio tapes have been transcribed and selected samples have been analyzed. Careful analysis of the what and the how of the patterns of interactions in the evryday life of the immersion kindergarten classroom reveal the complex and varied processes that give meaning and structure to the child's experience of French immersion kindergarten.

THE NATURE OF IMMERSION CLASSROOM SENSE-MAKING

Analysis of the video-tapes and observation notes suggests that, especially during the first semester, the children's main intention is to make sense of their kindergarten experience rather than to learn the French language per se. From the moment the children set foot in the immersion classroom, the implicit (often explicit) question guiding much of their individual and collective actions seems to be "What does she want of me? What am I supposed to do? What did she say?". In their actions, their words and their expressions, the children seek information concerning what is expected of them. By the end of the first day, the teacher and the children seem to have clearly established that the children should look to the teacher to find out what to do. The focus is often on actions: what to do, where to to go, what to say. As Delamont (1983) points out, the traditional student role is a subservient one in which the main duties are to follow the teacher's lead (p.107). The teacher and the children seem intent on clarifying what Erickson (1982) refers to as the "participant structures" of classroom situations. As we discuss elsewhere (Tardif and Weber, 1987), the nature of classroom activity is highly ritualistic with underlying game rules and fixed participation patterns guiding the interaction.

There are many factors which can determine how both the teacher and the children come to make sense of the kindergarten immersion experience. These determinants shape the participants' understanding of the situation and lead to the strategies used by the teacher, the students, and the group to communicate and to make sense of (find meaning in) their experience.

In order to understand what is going on and to make sense of the "strange" things the teacher is saying, children use a variety of strategies. They size up the situation by viewing how other children respond to the teacher's requests or directives. They notice the resemblance of certain French and English words. Most especially, they rely on non-verbal clues (gestures, pictures, tone of voice, etc.). They guess and approximate and watch carefully for reaction to their attempts to perform or to respond to the situation. They draw on their past experience and they search for repeated patterns. They rely heavily on the highly-structured and routine nature of classroom life to facilitate their understanding of the ongoing situation. "Most students share a bsic strategy of pleasing teacher. They play along with whatever communication style is demanded, assuming that they can discover what it is and accept its reasonableness and pay-off" (Delamont: 1983 p.124). In trying to make sense of the situation, the children often seem to be unconsciously (and perhaps even consciously) asking: "What is wanted of me?" As Delamont asserts: "All successful pupils must learn to size up teachers and the tasks they set, and then work out strategies to cope with the tasks" (p.107).

Being a kindergarten student means being part of a group and thereby participating in a social situation wherein a leader (teacher) explicitly and implicitly tries to establish her expectations for the group and for each of its members. However, the group members (children) also have expectations of the leader (teacher): the teacher must show us, the teacher will decide, the teacher will be the arbitrator to whom we can appeal for help and justice, the teacher must be fair, the teacher knows French, the teacher knows things, the teacher knows when we can do what.

Making sense of what is going on in the classroom is often very much a collective process, a fact almost totally ignored by second language immersion research. Meaning is continually being reinterpreted and re-negotiated with the teacher, between small group of children ("set interaction"), and amongst the larger group. The children are in this second language situation together and they may look to each other for help and clues almost as much as they look to the teacher. There is a shared meaning (often concerned with what to do or to answer), but at the same time, there are individual interpretations, each child experiencing his or her own approximation or guess of what the situation or word or teacher means. This process involves "sizing up" the other (a process of social construction), and sensing others' perspectives and expectatons of the situation. The sense-making process is facilitated by the anticipation of a familiar time sequence of interaction patterns and activities set by the teacher (see Weber and Tardif, 1987).

As the students seek to make sense of their experience by defining the situation, by identifying recurrent patterns of behaviors, and by hypothesizing the meaning of a situation individually and collectively, the teacher is also sizing up her students, seeking to impose structure on the situation and to give meaning to the kindergarten schooling experience in a language unfamiliar to the students.

Almost all of the strategies used by both teacher and children appear very early in the first year of school and continue throughout the kindergarten year. During interviews with the children and the teacher, we learned that many people are aware, to some extent, of the strategies they use; that is, some of the strategies become consciously-used tactics.

SENSE-MAKING STRATEGIES (INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP)

The following list of strategies is neither exhaustive nor exclusive. For example, our research corroborated some of the second language acquisition and second language teaching strategies identified in other contexts by such authors as Fillmore (1976, 1982), Tough (1977), and by Wells-Lindfors (1987). Some of the strategies are very basic, more like meta-strategies. Others are specific forms or variations of more basic strategies. Although some of the strategies are linguistic in nature, most of them, strictly speaking, are not. (Although, of course, without a linguistic base, the construction of meaning via any strategy might be very limited). Many of the strategies are frequently used in combination with or as part of another strategy.

1) **Attending to meaning**: - processes by which the child, the teacher, or the group attend to the situation, seeking some understanding and actively searching for clues to make some sense of the situation or communication. The sense-maker's focus is not necessarily on language but is rather on meaning and intention. All the following strategies are specific manifestations or sub-categories of this basic meta-strategy.

2) **Negotiation of meaning**: - involves interaction, actively giving feedback on what has been understood and seeking additional information, clues, or feedback to confirm this understanding. In addition, the negotiation of meaning in a sense involves a power struggle for control of meaning and control of the direction of the agenda. example 1: The teacher sings a Halloween song when it is not Halloween and a child is puzzled, asking if it is Halloween that day (responding to truth value). example 2: Teacher asks a girl the name of her Cabbage Patch Doll and one child says: "I have a Cabbage Patch Doll too".

The individual's negotiation of meaning is often interconnected with a group strategy. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from a ritual in which the teacher asks the class what the weather is like outside:

*Cl & T: Quel temps fait-il? Quel temps fait-il? (singing)
Girl : Rainy (interrupting song)
Cl & T: Les amis quel temps fait-il? (trans."Friends, what is the weather like?"
Boy : Rainy (an echo of girl? wanting to have the answer?)
T : Non, il ne pleut pas, pas encore, non, mais est-ce qu'il fait soleil?
Boy: Soleil (hearing in T's talk one possible answer?)
T : Non, il ne fait pas soleil.
Boy 2: Windy, Windy (responding to meaning of T's question)
T : Du vent, un peu, est-ce qu'il neige?
Cl : No
T : Est-ce que c'est nuageux? (trans. Is it cloudy?)
C : Yes
T : Oui, c'est nu-a-geux aujourd'hui. C'est nuageux
Girl: I know
T : O.K.

*Cl.= class or group of children

The children, (as a group and individually) seem to know that Teacher is asking about the weather. What they are not sure of is what words the teacher wants them to say in French and what the French words mean. Taking turns, and taking cues both from each other (rainy) and from T. (soleil), the group negotiates with the teacher, playing a kind of guessing game. They know (have come to expect?) that Teacher will give them feedback on each guess.

Like the first strategy, the negotiation of meaning is a basic meta-strategy and most of the following strategies can be viewed as variations or subcategories of ways to negotiate meaning.

3) **Relying on translation or "mediation of meaning"**: - using suggested interpretations offered by others. One child, for example, will often spontaneously act as translator or "mediator of meaning" for a group or for an individual child. example: When asked (in French) the name of her doll, a girl does not respond. Acting as an interpretor, another child whispers an English approximation of the teacher's message loudly and directly to the girl. The child who is acting as interpretor is using the Good Guess (see no. 8) strategy which in turn enables other children to rely on the mediation of meaning as a sense-making strategy.

The group's involvement in interpreting the meaning of classroom events is evident even in one-to-one exchanges between teacher and child. Whatever goes on when the group is seated together seems to be everybody's business. Perhaps this is less the case in higher grade levels where teachers direct students to do their own work and to mind their own business.

4) **Participation, modeling, and imitation**: - participating in what the others are doing against an ongoing 2nd language background imparts an experienced-based meaning to a situation. Utterances become related to the experience of action. Words are often words-as-acts. example: When asked what a given French phrase means, the children often respond with action verbs from the lived experience that they associate with those words instead of the exact meaning of the phrase. In addition, the children soon learn that kindergarten is a place where you are often asked to model the talk and behaviour of an adult. Imitating adults seems to be a basic universal strategy of childhood (Feitelson, 1977; Schwartzman, 1978) and indeed is the basis of much of their imaginative role-playing. Modeling and imitation are simultaneously elements of the participation structures of many second language classroom rituals as well as strategies that children use to make sense of new situations by acquiring a useful experience base for future interpretations. It is also the basis for a very frequently-used teaching strategy.

Sept. 10 a.m. - Teacher initiates (for only the second time) the "bonjour" (hello) routine:

T : Bonjour les amis
Class & T : Bonjour Madame Lavallée (she motions for them to say it with her)
T : Bonjour les amis (she motions, wanting them to respond without her)
Class : Bonjour Madame Lavallée (she is mouthing it silently with them)
T : Bonjour S
S : Bonjour Madame Lavallée
T : Bonjour Kevin
K : Hi!
T : Bonjour?...(she has begun to prompt him, to motion and guide him to answer in French according to the formula)

Teacher is motioning to them to repeat and is modeling for them. It seems to be clear to the children that her message

is basically: "Watch me and repeat what I am saying". The group as a whole responds and is correctly interpreting the situation, not only by listening and watching, but also by seeing and hearing that the others are responding. Some are more hesitant and seem less sure. The teacher and the group help them bridge the gap (i.e. include them in the group negotiations) by prompting them and motioning to them. (Sometimes, the children poke or nudge each other to get a deviant's attention, to bring them into the fold of the group negotiations). Kevin, for example, knows part of the meaning of the situation - that they are saying hello to each other, but at first he does not seem to want to (or be able to) participate in the ritual or group meaning of "repeat what teacher wants you to say in French". The teacher and the group teach Kevin the participation strategy of imitation that in time will also become a sense-making strategy.

5) **Anticipating routine sequence and patterns of interaction:**
One of the strategies that people use to make sense of a situation is to expect that today will be much like yesterday. As school was yesterday, so the children expect it to be today. The children make sense of what is going on and of what teacher is saying by using their knowledge that teacher often repeats the same songs, rituals, and routines in the same way and in the same order on a daily basis.
The conscious repetition of routines by the teacher gives the children the opportunity to guess right, to anticipate what comes next, to be in the know, to relax in the security and participate in the complicity of the group ritual. To learn the routines, you learn to recognize the cues: gestures and "formula" phrases that become meaning-markers (signals), saying in effect: "Attention, here it comes". Recognizing and understanding of these cues thus become an important sense-making strategy for the children. Through repeated experience, the children come to recognize the meaning markers, thinking, as it were, "Now it's time for__" example: Teacher is counting the numbers (in French) on the calendar with the children. The children have come to expect that looking out the window and describing the weather is usually the next thing Teacher will want them to do.

T: C'est le dix-sept septembre, regardez dehors, hmm (she looks out the window but has not yet asked the usual key question (cue) of "Quel temps fait-il?".

Boy: Cloudy (anticipating the question, taking her looking outside as a cue, knowing what routine comes next, responding to the meaning of the situation rather than to an exact verbal clue).

6) **Using the filter of past experience: Drawing on the first language culture and on the culture of childhood** - process by which the children actively seek to use their past cultural experience and knowledge to make sense of what is going on. The first language culture and the North American culture of childhood include such things as:

- religious and other festivals e.g. Christmas, Halloween
- fairy tales: The Three Bears, Little Red Riding Hood etc.
- television programs - e.g. Sesame Street, Saturday morning cartoons
- commercials and toys (e.g. Cabbage Patch, Transformers)
- local customs
- games - e.g. Hide'n Seek - In a variation of this game, Teacher gives children objects and covers her eyes and asks who has the pencil, etc. Because the group shares the cultural knowledge of other variations of hide'n seek, they are able to quite successfully attribute an appropriate meaning to the situation. The understanding of the game seems to orient them to the situation so that they are free to concentrate on the word-objet association that becomes essential to successfully playing the game.

Shared culture also enables children to recognize humour in a situation, for example, an incident in which the teacher suddenly lifted up a doll's dress in a slightly scandalized fashion in order to ask what colour its underpants are.

Observed humour is evidence of shared meaning:

Teacher: Bonjour Pierrot (turning suddenly to paper octopus)
Children: Laughter

The children find it funny to see Teacher talking to a paper octopus. They have heard her say "Bonjour" to them and many seem to have a translation of Hi for it. Because of their collective experience and knowledge (adults don't normally talk to paper animals), they are thus able to see the humour in the unexpected situation, which of course, is what the teacher intends. She uses the unexpected violation of cultural norms to create a meaningful second language experience for the children.

7) **Comparing L2 to L1**: - an obvious and useful strategy because of similarities between English and French example:

Context: Singing song for le "goûter" (about third time children are exposed to this song), T is NOT pointing or making gestures, finishes song with "les biscuits, les bananes, yum yum yum".

B is eating a banana and you can see an expression of delighted recognition or connection spread across his face as he hears the word "bananes" (with a big smile). There is delight in seeing how the French word resembles the English word, the joy of making a link, or recognizing sameness, of discovering for oneself.

8) **The good guess or approximation:** - sizing up the situation and acting or speaking to verify one's interpretation, for example, by responding appropriately in terms of what one has understood, or by calling out one's interpretation to see what effect it produces. This strategy can be similar in many respects to Wells-Linfors' (1986) language acquisition strategy, "produce language and see how others respond and/or observe how others express meaning" (p.455)

9) **The random guess**: - guessing via elimination, example: Fllowing teacher's request for "crayon de plomb" (pencil), S. picks up one thing after another and asks "This?".

10) **"Sizing-up" people and the context (social meaning)** -
- described by Delamont (1983) as the process of socially constructing the other (pp. 61 and 90)
- includes the influence and consideration (often unconscious) of such things as personal "front" (Goffman, 1959), manner of speech, clothing, race, age, family background, and class in the construction of meaning.

11) **Attending to the paralanguage elements of communication** - relying on the pervasive meaning clues of paralanguage that accompany and infuse all interaction. Pennycook (1985) includes in paralanguage the verbal (paraverbal), the kinesic (the gestural), and the proxemic (spatial) dimensions of communication. As Watzlawick et al. (1969) assert, it is the analogic (their term for paralanguage) rather than the digital (linguistic) message that usually determines the true meaning of a communication. Following Dienske's lead, we would like to expand paralanguage even further to include such intangibles as the atmosphere, mood, and colour of a situation. This is one of the most frequently-used strategies in immersion classrooms. The importance of its role in teaching and learning can be readily seen in other strategies, see for example, the illustration in strategy 14.

12) **Relying on the reciprocity of communication**: - the ability of all human communication to evoke a response from another person gives impetus to efforts to construct meaning.
You cannot not communicate (Watzlawick et al. 1969). The nonlinguistic features of the language experience such as mood and atmosphere convey some sort of feeling and rapport (or lack of it) which supports the construction of specific meanings. This is a variation of strategy 11.

13) **Attending to meaning context or meaning-structures of the situation** - e.g. the cognitive structure of the situation, using the situational context and structure to provide a kind of "scaffolding" of meaning (Bruner 1975).
Example: a small, low table set with four placemats, cutlery, glasses, and food and drink clearly extend an invitation to four children to sit down and eat even if they do not understand the accompanying French linguistic input.

14) **Asking questions** - e.g. asking for clarification. As Wells-Linsdfors (1987) points out, this is a basic strategy that is widely used yet seldom reported or studied in the research literature.

example: a teacher is reading a story from a large picture book to a group of children.

T: Un jour, Sara descendait l'escalier (One day, Sara was going down the stairs)

Child: What does that mean?

T: Points to Sara in the picture and with fingers makes a walking down the stairs kind of motion while repeating in French what she had said.

Child: Oh, she's going down the stairs.

This example also illustrates how the children can combine the strategy of questioning with the strategy of reading paralinguistic clues.

Summary

The sense-making strategies that have been described illustrate well the interaction that occurs between teacher and students and the kinds of strategies that may be used at different levels of classroom communication. We see the intertwining of more formal, planned second language teaching strategies that are used by the teacher and students (modeling, repetition, echoing, prompting, questioning) with the unplanned social communicative uses of language used by the teacher and students in response to each one's agenda for talk. What becomes important in considering the nature of sense-making in the immersion classroom, is the interaction between teacher talk and student talk and the overlapping between the two.

CONCLUSIONS

This study highlights the nature of classroom communication within an immersion setting, illustrating how a second language context throws into an almost startling relief the importance and the pervasiveness of classroom ritual and culture, as well as underlining the importance of the paralanguage (Pennycook, 1985) aspects of interaction to sense-making processes. Meaning resides not so much in words as in the total experience. Besides relying on linguistic clues, the child comes to understand the situation by attending to the paralinguistic clues, by seeking feedback and additional information, by learning and anticipating the routines and rituals of school culture, and by drawing on previous knowledge and on childhood culture. The negotiation of meaning which arises between the participants is context-embedded and is often a collective as well as an individual process. This has been documented in first language acquisition research (e.g. Halliday, 1975; Wells, 1979) but has been largely ignored by the research on immersion schooling. The focus in immersion has tended to be on the purely linguistic aspects of language development rather than on understanding the construction or intuiting of meaning within a total situation. More ethnographic descriptions of immersion classrooms are needed in order to better understand and interpret the nature of immersion teaching.

Our preliminary findings also suggest that there may be a scarcity of natural, child-initiated communication within the immersion classroom context during the long periods of teacher-directed activities. The teacher is usually the one who controls the situation and who governs the agenda for talk. This is not dissimilar to research results dealing with classroom interaction in the first language (Wells, 1983; Delamont, 1976; Edwards and Furlong, 1978).

The process of second language learning is almost peripheral to the more central process of socialization to school life, especially at the kindergarten level. This is not to say that the children did not learn French, indeed we were amazed by their rapid progress, but rather that their perceptions of kindergarten and the focus of their behaviour centered on adapting to the demands of school life. Thusfar, we have

identified very few major differences between the demands and the structure of immersion kindergartens in comparison with the first language kindergartens that we have filmed. Indeed, we wonder if the importance of linguistic aspects of early childhood classroom communication has been overemphasized in the theoretical literature, under-rating the importance of paralanguage and of the various other ways in which teachers and children find and construct meaning.

The findings of this study provide promising avenues for further research: There is a need to look more closely at unilingual kindergarten classes in order to more accurately compare their communication patterns with those of immersion kindergarten classes. From a pedagogical point of view, it would be interesting to see whether the immersion teacher utilizes different strategies in order to give meaning to a situation. Is there for example a specific paralanguage of second language immersion teaching? Are the functions of language broader in a first language classroom than in an immersion classroom? Do the participants (teacher and children) use language for different purposes? We are now investigating additional French immersion and unilingual English classroom to explore these questions.

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